

House plan adds fourth minority district

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Adam Kealoha Causey
acausey@gannett.com

BATON ROUGE — More debate is expected after narrow approval Wednesday of a controversial House plan that would make it easier to elect a fourth black state representative from Shreveport.

The House and Governmental Affairs Committee voted 10-9 to tack on an amendment by state Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, to the main redistricting bill from Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Terrytown.

Debate was long and at times contentious during the meeting. Besides attempts at predicting how the Department of Justice will view Louisiana's reworking of political boundaries, discussion came complete with references to God and accusations of deception.

Gallot's goal, he said, is to adhere to federal law.

"If you identify areas where minority districts can be drawn, there is an obligation to do that," Gallot said about his interpretation of the Voting Rights Act.



The Associated Press

Reps. Herbert Dixon, D-Alexandria, left, Roy Burrell, D-Shreveport, second from left, Patrick Connick, R-Marrero, and John Schroder, R-Covington look over amendments to a bill that would redraw voting districts for House members Wednesday during a meeting of the House Committee on House and Governmental Affairs.

Louisiana is among a group of states that receives extra federal scrutiny because of its history of racial discrimination.

Moving the borders for Shreveport-centric districts will affect several sitting representatives. Newly sworn-in state Rep. Alan Seabaugh, R-Shreveport, would be forced to run in

the district currently represented by state Rep. Richie Burford, R-Stonewall.

State Rep. Barbara Norton, D-Shreveport, said the black population in her district would be diluted. As is, she represents a population that is about 88 percent black. Under Gallot's plan, the proportion of African-American voters

would be smaller but still more than 60 percent.

For his plan, Gallot analyzed voting statistics for President Barack Obama's historic election in 2008 and Mayor Cedric Glover's second successful bid in 2010.

But Tucker took Norton's side and said Gallot's fig-

ures aren't fair gauges. Looking at 2007 elections for state legislators would be a more accurate prediction of what would happen if Seabaugh's district is reshaped to include more blacks.

"Those two elections are like comparing apples to oranges," Tucker said. "At the end of the day, you run the risk ... of not being able to elect minorities."

With such a close vote, the committee could bring up Gallot's amendment again today. The full House also could weigh in this week.

Seabaugh, who was elected last fall and is in his first legislative session, pointed out that Caddo is majority white. Right now, the parish's six representatives are evenly divided — three white, three black.

"We can always bring it up again on the floor," Seabaugh said. "I am an attorney, and I respectfully disagree with a lot of the legal analysis I've heard today."

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House and Governmental Affairs Committee members on Monday heard from about 10 Shreveporters who oppose a new minority district. They live or work in the Southern Hills neighborhood. Gallot's plan splits the area into two districts created to be served by a black representative.

The redistricting process happens every 10 years, after the Census.

Political subdivisions must have roughly the same population. The state's 105 House districts each should have about 43,174 residents.

The ongoing special legislative session is scheduled to last through April 13.

Lines also will be reconfigured for the state House of Representatives and Senate, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Public Service Commission and, possibly, the Supreme Court and courts of appeal.